

# His Unlikely Lover Novel Chapter 11 To 12

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Corvette looked amazing and she handled like a dream. Bobbi stood back and examined the grand old dame with misty eyes. Jason would be picking her up in half an hour, and Bobbi felt like a parent sending her child off to school for the first time. Her proud sense of accomplishment was accompanied by a bittersweet pang of loss. She had put so much into this project, both financially and emotionally.

It had helped keep her mind off Gabe, who hadn't called, e-mailed, or SMS'd since that awful night nearly two weeks before. Bobbi couldn't believe that she hadn't seen or spoken to him in so long. She felt so empty, like she was missing a piece of her soul. The longest they had gone without speaking before had been a week and that had been because Gabe had been in a part of Africa that had little to no cell-phone reception and dodgy Internet connections.

She saw Chase quite often, but even that was starting to get painful because he was looking healthier by the day, which meant that he and Gabe were starting to look identical again. Even though Bobbi hadn't ever confused one for the other, the physical resemblance was still hard to deal with. She tried her best not to let Chase see how much it hurt her sometimes to look at him.

She wiped away a smudge on the car's gleaming red bonnet, talking to it all the while.

"He has promised to take really good care of you this time. He'll take you out on lovely scenic drives, and he'll have you washed and serviced regularly. I know you're scared that he'll just leave you to gather more rust and dust, but when he sees you he's going to fall in love with you. I promise."

"Boss?" She turned around to see Pieter, fully recovered from his unfortunate case of measles. He was slouching as usual with his hands shoved into his overall pockets.

"Yes?"

"You have a phone call." He jerked his head toward her office, and Bobbi gave the Corvette one last polish before retreating to her office. She had managed to clear some of the paperwork off her desk over the past few weeks—one of the very few perks of having a broken heart.

"Bobbi Richmond," she greeted absently, preoccupied as she remembered that she had wanted to check the radiator hose on the Corvette one final time. She was sure

that it was fine but even new hoses could be flawed and Bobbi was a perfectionist when it came to her work.

“Hello, Bobbi.” She was so busy hunting for a pen to write down a reminder to check the hose that the voice didn’t register at first. When it did, she forgot all else and sank down into her ancient office chair, her legs suddenly losing their ability to support her.

“Gabe,” she murmured. She wasn’t sure how else to respond.

“How are you?” he asked, his voice revealing absolutely nothing of what he was feeling.

“I’m good. Busy.” There was a long pause.

“I wanted to ask you something,” he said, only after the silence had stretched past the point of painfully awkward. There was more excruciating silence as he waited for a response from her. She swallowed and refused to make this any easier for him than it had to be.

“Uh . . . anyway. I was wondering if you would do me the honor . . . I mean, if you would grace me . . .” His voice faded away and her eyebrows leapt up into her hairline, she was so stunned by his uncharacteristic lack of eloquence. He cleared his throat. “I was hoping you’d go to the Valentine’s Day event . . . with me.” The words emerged on one breath and practically merged together he said them so swiftly.

Bobbi’s jaw had dropped and she wasn’t quite sure she had heard him correctly.

“What?” she asked unsteadily.

“Will you go the Valentine’s Day Ball with me?” he repeated, his voice more measured now but still with a slight wobble. Bobbi’s fingers tightened around the receiver uncertainly.

“Why are you doing this?” she whispered, her throat tight with tears.

“I . . . miss you. I want you back in my life. I want us to, you know, do it right this time and . . .”

“No.” She interrupted whatever he’d been about to say, her voice vehement. “I don’t want to hear any more about what you want, Gabe. I can’t go to the ball with you. I have a date. And even if I didn’t have a date . . . I wouldn’t have gone with you.” She paused for a moment to allow that to sink in. “I have to go. I’m busy right now.”

She replaced the receiver back in its cradle with the utmost care and blindly turned away from her desk. She wouldn’t allow him to creep into her life only to make her feel inadequate again. She was determined to be stronger than that.

A date? The knowledge filled Gabe with panic. Was he too late? Had somebody else snatched her up while Gabe had sat around feeling sorry for himself? The thought was unbearable.

He studied the surface of his meticulously arranged desk. Just the way he liked it—everything neatly stowed away. Not a paperclip out of place. Bobbi had been the only bit of chaos in his life, but he now found that without her, his well-ordered life was . . . bland. He missed his lover and he missed his friend. He had foolishly tried to keep those two facets of her in separate boxes and it had naturally backfired on him. He was damned well going to do this thing right from now onward. Amateur hour was coming to an end.

Bobbi started monitoring her calls after that. After that football night, she hadn't expected him to hear from again for a long time and that phone call to the shop had rattled her immensely. She had Craig on phone duties, knowing that he would be vigilant about not letting any calls from Gabe slip through the cracks. She ignored any calls to her cell phone from him and simply came home too late for him to call the house.

His messages started to pile up over the next few days. Voice mails clogged up her cell-phone inbox and handwritten notes from her father were left outside her bedroom door.

“Please call me.”

“I'm sorry I missed you. Please call.”

“I missed you again. Please call.”

“Call me.”

And on and on it went. The voice mails he left on her cell phone were more detailed:

“I know I hurt you. I just want a chance to make it right. I miss you. Please call me.”

“Bobbi, I miss you. Call me.”

“I wish you'd answer my calls.”

“I can't do this (he never elaborated on what “this” meant) in a message. I need to speak with you. Let me know when it'll be convenient for me to call you or see you.”

It was driving her crazy. At her previous girls' night a few days before, each woman said she'd had at least one message from Gabe. They never urged her to call him though. They merely relayed the messages and then carried on as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Nobody had forced her to talk about it. They respected her silence on the matter. And she was eternally grateful for that.

“Good. You’re home.” Her father met Bobbi at the door when she let herself in that evening. He looked flustered and annoyed.

“Dad? What’s wrong?” She stepped past her agitated father and tried to drop her messenger bag carelessly onto a side table in the foyer, as she usually did. A huge bouquet of white roses resting on the tiny table thwarted the automatic gesture. She frowned and glanced around, looking for a different table, but they were all covered in gorgeous bouquets of white roses.

“Oh,” she said blankly.

“Yes, oh,” her father grouched. “They’re everywhere.”

“Where did they come from?” she asked, wondering if there had been some kind of planning mishap with the Valentine’s Day thing. She knew that their theme was red and white—so original—maybe they had miscalculated the number of white roses they needed?

“They’re for you,” he said pointedly, and her eyes widened.

“But . . .”

“Look, I know you and Gabe have had some kind of tiff and if this is any indication, he feels terrible about it.” Her father knew nothing about what had happened between Gabe and Bobbi. Thankfully Billy had kept his mouth shut about the incident at the football match, even though her brother had futilely tried—on numerous occasions—to open up a dialogue with Bobbi about it.

“They’re from Gabe?” She knew her voice sounded flat and if her father’s frown was any indication, he didn’t understand why she wasn’t more enthusiastic about the floral “apology.”

“They are . . .” He nodded. “Gabe called after the first delivery and asked me to grab the card out of one of the bouquets and to be sure that you received and read it.”

That sneaky rat! He knew that if it had been up to her the card would have been tossed into the bin unread, but by involving her father, Gabe had made it impossible for her not to read it. She took the pretty cream card from her father and glanced down at it. Gabe’s bold handwriting slashed across the surface of the small square of paper, and it took her a second to decipher the elegant cursive script.

Did you know that white roses signify new beginnings? I was hoping you’d appreciate that sentiment. Please turn over for more . . .

She refused to smile at the polite instruction on the bottom of the tiny card. Anybody else would have been satisfied with an abbreviated PTO, but Gabe, of course, had to write a properly structured and well-mannered sentence. She turned over.

These roses are white

Most violets are blue (well they're actually violet but for the purposes of this poem we'll say blue)

Bobbi, my sweet

I really miss you

(I'm sorry. I'm really bad at poetry—G)

She covered her mouth with a hand as she tried to stifle the half laugh, half sob that threatened to bubble up from her throat. This was . . . what was this? She didn't even know what he meant to achieve with this.

"I'm going up for a shower, I'll see you at dinner," she said, folding her hand around the card and feeling the expensive bond paper cut into her palm. Her father's face fell when she made no mention of the card's contents. After she reached her room, she put the card onto her dresser and meticulously smoothed the creases out of the stiff paper. She read the words one last time before tearing the card up into four squares and tossing them into her dresser drawer.

After a quick shower, she decided to call Chase. He answered his cell phone almost immediately.

"Tell him to stop this," she said, seething, before he'd even had a chance say hello.

"What?" he asked in confusion.

"Chase, tell him to stop! I'm not amused." She hung up and tossed the phone aside.

"So what's going on?" Chase asked Gabe, who was sitting in the den, staring at the muted television.

"What do you mean?" Gabe asked, looking up from the dancing couple on the screen.

"What the hell are you watching?" Chase was momentarily diverted by the garish costumes and blindingly white smiles.

"Some competition about vaguely famous people learning ballroom dancing, I think." Gabe shrugged listlessly.

"Why are you watching it with the sound turned down?"

“The music is terrible,” Gabe said before going back to Chase’s original subject. “What did you mean by that first question?”

Still staring at the screen in horrified fascination, Chase stumbled around the back of the sofa and sat down next to Gabe.

“Bobbi just called me.” That snagged Gabe’s interest and he sat up—wondering how pissed off she had been by his gesture. He knew her well enough to know that she wouldn’t have been happy, but it would have gotten her attention at least.

“She wants you to stop. She’s not amused.” Pretty much what Gabe had expected and he felt a reluctant smile tug at the corners of his mouth. He hadn’t felt like smiling in weeks, but one angry message from her and he felt like a drowning man who had been thrown a lifeline.

“What did you do?” Chase asked curiously—his eyes glued to the screen. The whirling couple had stopped dancing and now seemed to be standing in front of a panel of excitable judges.

“I sent her flowers,” Gabe said, and Chase choked before turning to stare at Gabe in complete disbelief.

“Uh . . .” His brother seemed at a loss for words.

“Roughly twelve dozen white roses. I imagine she’s pretty pissed off right now.”

“If you knew she’d be angry why did you send them?” Chase looked baffled.

“Because I knew that it would prompt a reaction from her,” Gabe said. “She’s been ignoring my calls.”

“Sending flowers was a pretty public thing to do,” Chase commented.

“I know.”

“Do you know what you’re doing?”

“God, I hope so,” Gabe said fervently. Chase merely studied him for a beat before allowing another gaudily outfitted couple on TV to distract him as they took to the dance floor.

“Hey, I’ve seen that guy before,” he said, grabbing the remote control from the coffee table. “That’s the guy from that early nineties archery action movie. Remember? We loved that movie when we were kids. What was the title?”

Gabe squinted at the screen and snorted.

“Yeah, I remember. We begged Mum to enroll us in archery classes after that,” Gabe recalled.

“And she stuck us in bloody ballet classes instead.” They both winced at the memory. Thankfully the ballet classes had only lasted a couple of months; their mother had been forced to remove them after the instructor complained about the eleven-year-old twins’ obstructive behavior. They had spent more time ruffling tutus and switching up everybody’s toe shoes than they had paying attention to the lessons.

“What was the title of that movie?” Gabe wondered aloud. Bobbi would know—she was awesome at remembering movie trivia and she had loved the movie as much as they had. At six years old she had still been young enough to score a plastic bow and arrow set with sucker cups on the ends of the arrows. She had had a fabulous time pretending to be the lead in her own action movie, constantly ambushing them when they least expected it. Gabe smiled at the memory. God, he missed her so much.

“Damn, how much work has this guy had done?” Chase leaned forward to peer more closely at the C-list actor who had once been a hero to them. Gabe grimaced at the plasticky sheen to the man’s skin. Chase turned the sound up and they both recoiled at the terrible rendition of “Yesterday” that the live band was offering up as an accompaniment to a halfway-decent waltz.

“He’s not too bad.” Chase was completely riveted by the dancing on the screen and Gabe left him to it. The music was too distracting and Gabe wasn’t in the right frame of mind to sit and watch television.

He went up to change into his swim trunks and spent a couple of hours relentlessly swimming laps in the hopes that it would tire him out enough to sleep through the night. He hadn’t had a decent night’s sleep since that last night with Bobbi and it was starting to wear him down.

On his way up to bed two hours later he passed the open door of the den and was surprised to see Chase still sitting there watching that same god-awful dancing show. It amused him enough to go into the room.

“Why are you still watching this?” he asked. Chase barely acknowledged him, keeping his eyes glued on the screen.

“It’s a marathon. Ssh,” he shushed urgently. “They’re leading up to a double elimination!” Rolling his eyes, Gabe turned and exited the room. The dramatic music reached a crescendo and the announcer’s voice rang out to be instantly followed by both boos and cheers.

“Oh my God, that’s crap. She was the better dancer out there!” Chase yelled, and followed that diatribe up with a string of colorful curses. Gabe left him to it and made his way upstairs, his mind back on Bobbi and his next plan of action.

“Oh dear God.” Bobbi watched helplessly as an endless stream of deliverymen carried in basket after basket of fresh flowers. She had tried to send them back, but the guy in charge had shrugged and told her that since the flowers were paid for there was nothing he could do except deliver them. If she wanted to return them or send them elsewhere she would have to take it up with his boss. Craig and Sean flanked her and Pieter stood slightly behind her as they watched every surface of their workshop get covered with pretty purple hyacinth and pink rose bouquets. The only reason the flower-illiterate Bobbi even knew the purple flower was a hyacinth was because of the card one of the deliverymen thrust into her hands. She had glanced down instinctively and had been caught off guard by the distinctive script on the paper:

Did you know that purple hyacinths are the perfect flower for begging forgiveness? And pink roses signify my admiration for you (I'm not making this stuff up. Google and Wikipedia are truly my allies here) —G

His handwriting had gotten increasingly cramped as he ran out of space on the small square of paper and this time only an arrow was there to indicate that she should turn over. She stubbornly refused to do so. And shoved the card into the breast pocket of her overalls instead.

“This is pretty embarrassing, boss,” Sean grouched. “We’re an auto shop, not some flower shop.”

“I know that!” Bobbi snapped. “Do you think I don’t know that?” Sean backed off.

“I’m just saying.” He shrugged.

“Well you don’t have to say everything that pops into your head, Sean! Especially not something so perfectly obvious.” She glared at him and he shrugged again, wisely choosing not to respond.

“So what are we supposed to do with this stuff?” Pieter asked in that surly way of his, sending death stares at the pretty flowers cluttering up their workspace.

“Hey, boss, do you suppose I could have one of these bouquets for Ellie?” Craig asked hopefully. “She’s a bit angry with me at the moment.”

“What did you do this time?” Sean asked, and Craig shook his head, lifting his baseball cap to scratch at his slightly receding hairline.

“Take my advice, son, there is no right answer to the question, ‘how big is my bum in this skirt?’ especially not if she asks you to rate the size from one to ten.”

“Not even if you say one?” Sean asked curiously.

“It’s best to lie through your teeth. Whatever you think the answer is, subtract at least a hundred from it. I thought three and a half was being generous. I mean the woman had three children, for chrissakes! You’d think she’d have been happy with a three and half.”

Bobbi was too distracted by the stupid flowers and Gabe’s message to pay any attention to the back-and-forth banter between the two men. She told them to help themselves to bouquets for their girlfriends, mothers, or wives and then retreated to her office. It wasn’t quite the escape she’d hoped for, not while she could still see the flowers brightening up the place. Gabe’s card was burning a hole in her pocket, and she resisted it for a few more minutes before tugging it out. She reread the message on the front before reluctantly flipping it over to have a look at the back:

Violets are purple

You know that it's true

Without you in my life

I truly am blue

"Damn it," she whispered. The words blurred as she fought back angry tears. She itched to call him, even if just to beg him to stop this, but that was what he wanted. He wanted her to call him, to acknowledge him, and she needed more time to get over him. It was going to take a while before she had hardened her heart enough to be in his proximity again.

She knuckled away the stupid tears and decided to have the flowers delivered to old-age homes and hospitals. Maybe if she just continued to ignore him he would stop whatever it was that he thought he was doing.

Two nights later she came home to find the house inundated with the garish combination of iris and orange rose bouquets. Her father glared at her when she trudged in wearily after a tough day.

"I don't know what's going on between you and Gabriel—you're both being so stubbornly close-mouthed about it—but I am getting sick of the both of you languishing around me in despair and this . . . endless procession of flowers has got to stop. It's wreaking havoc with my allergies."

"You don't have allergies, Daddy," Bobbi pointed out.

"I damned well will by the time the two of you come to your senses. I don't know what this fight was about, but Gabriel is running a multimillion-dollar corporation, and he's worse than a damned teenager these days. I want my efficient and cold-as-ice CEO back right now. And I tell you what: I'm getting damned sick of your moping around too. So you and he had better fix this ridiculousness as soon as possible. Watching the two of you carefully avoiding each other is depressing as hell."

She didn't say anything and her father threw up his hands in frustration before thrusting the inevitable card into her hand.

"Here's your card," he growled before stalking off toward his man cave.

I know this combination is a bit loud but did you know that irises represent eternal friendship? And the orange roses embody my desire for you.

I know I'm a terrible poet but I hope you'll read my latest attempt on the other side of this card —G

Friendship and desire? That left them in pretty much the same boat as before. The separation between the two roles was too large and Bobbi was so done with being torn

between the role of good friend and lover. She sighed, bowed down to the inevitable, and flipped the card over.

Your eyes are pretty

Your lips are too

Bobbi, my darling

I'm miserable without you

She examined the card for a long time before carefully tucking it into one of her jeans pockets. A headache was forming above her brow, and she slunk up to her bedroom, deciding to forego dinner in favor of a good night's sleep.

"Bobbi," her name was whispered directly into her ear and Bobbi sighed, before murmuring a protest and turning over in bed. "Bobbi, wake up."

She groaned and batted at the person hovering above her. Her hand made contact with warm flesh.

"Ouch." She frowned at the muffled exclamation and opened her eyes in confusion. The light was still off and she could just make out the dark silhouette of the man in her room outlined against the slightly lighter backdrop of the window.

"What . . ." She sat up and clutched her comforter to her chest, staring at the large figure in fright. "Who . . . ?"

"Ssh, don't panic," the very familiar voice whispered frantically. "It's me."

"Gabe? What are you doing here? Who let you in?"

"I wanted to come in through the window, like in the old days." He and Chase had often climbed the rose trellis below her second floor window and snuck into the house when they were children, and the three of them would then slink into Billy's room and they would spend the night playing. By the time Faye would come to wake them up in

the morning, the four of them would be piled on Billy's bed, fast asleep, which had always resulted in a severe scolding from their parents, but it had never deterred them from doing it again.

"You didn't?" She gasped, and could just make him shaking his head in the gloomy light.

"I think your security guys would probably have had me arrested if I'd attempted it. No I came in through the front door and your dad very happily told me where to find you—after ordering me to get rid of the orange and purple 'monstrosities' that were stinking up his house." His voice was warm and engaging, clearly inviting her to join in his amusement, but Bobbi was too appalled by his presence in her room to feel anything other than alarm.

"My dad knows you're up here?" she squeaked. "Oh God!"

"Relax," Gabe soothed. "Firstly, you're not exactly a teenager sneaking her boyfriend into her room, and secondly, your dad doesn't know that I have licentious designs on your hot little body, now does he?"

"Of course he doesn't," she agreed bitterly. "Why would he? It's not like it's anything you wanted people to know."

He didn't respond to that and the silence seemed much too oppressive in the dark room. Bobbi reached for the lamp switch and flooded the area directly around the bed in a small pool of warm, yellow light. She still couldn't see him clearly because he sat just outside the tiny circle of light, but she knew that he could see her and she immediately felt at a disadvantage.

"Why are you here?" she asked, keeping her voice cold as she folded her arms self-consciously across her chest.

“To see you.” The unspoken duh following those three words was so clear that he might as well have said it.

“I don’t want to see you. I want you to leave,” she said in her most authoritative voice. It lost its impact somewhat when the speaker was wearing a Daisy Duck nightshirt.

“Who are you going to the Valentine’s Day Ball with?” he asked unexpectedly, and she lifted her chin defiantly.

“None of your business,” she informed haughtily.

“Kyle Foster?”

“So what if I am?” She wasn’t going with Kyle; she had politely informed the man that while she liked him, it just wasn’t fair of her to keep seeing him when she was in love with another man. It would be like doing to someone else what had been done to her, and she understood the pain of unrequited love and passion too much to inflict it on someone else. He had very graciously conceded her point and had backed off.

“I would rather you went with me,” Gabe said.

“Well, I’m not. I’d hate to embarrass you in front of your colleagues with my lack of dress sense and grimy fingernails,” she said pointedly.

“I’d be honored to have you by my side,” he said, after a pause.

“Would you now?” she scoffed. “What if I chose to wear a tank top and jeans?”

“I don’t see why you would,” he said stiffly. “Your dad wouldn’t be happy.”

“Oh so you’re banking on me looking semi-respectable because I wouldn’t want to embarrass my father?”

“Bobbi, I know that what I said the other night hurt you, but you have to admit . . . the way you dress sometimes just wouldn’t suit my lifestyle.”

She swallowed painfully.

“And that’s why it’s best if we just aren’t together,” she said pragmatically, attempting to disguise the pain in her eyes by lowering her gaze to the comforter. “I can’t possibly fit into your life and you won’t fit into mine. I was never interested in the elegant dinners and the fancy events that my dad hosted when we were growing up. I’m still not. I wouldn’t have the faintest idea how to speak to some of the people you deal with. You were right, we were just never meant to be more than friends.”

“I never said that,” he protested.

“You implied it when you said that the way I am never bothered you when we were just friends. If being with you in a more intimate capacity means changing who I am, then I’m afraid it’s too big a sacrifice for me to make.”

“So I am the one who has to make all the changes? That hardly seems fair,” he declared.

“What changes? I haven’t asked you to change a single thing about yourself for me!” She was outraged that he’d implied as much.

“Of course you have,” he dissented. “Expecting me to not care about the appearance of the woman by my side goes against everything I believe in. I like order and you know that. I like everything to be neat and in its place. Where would I slot you in, if your role in my life changed? And don’t get me wrong, Bobbi, I want your role in my life to change. I want to give us a real chance . . . but we have to come to some sort of compromise here.”

“And by compromise you mean I change my hair, my clothes, my way of life just for the honor of what exactly? Being your girlfriend? Your mistress? And you, of course, would compromise by . . . ?” She left him to fill in the blank but he remained silent, and she snorted in bitter amusement. “I suppose your great compromise would be

getting to tolerate a less than perfect bit of arm candy for the couple of months it'll take you to work me out of your system. And when it does end, you go trotting on your merry way to pick your next conquest in your search to find a woman perfect enough to be Mrs. Gabriel Andrew Braddock and I go back to my shop feeling publicly humiliated for not being good enough to snag the great Gabriel Braddock."

"That's not how it would be." He didn't sound very convincing at all. "I think we have a real chance at something special, it just took me a while to see it. I want us to be together and I want us to go into a relationship with hope for a future together rather than the expectation of failure."

"Do you love me?" she asked, and despite the gloom, she could see that he was visibly startled by the question.

"Of course I love you," he blurted, sounding offended by the question.

"Okay, allow me to rephrase the question. Are you in love with me?"

"That's hardly a fair question, Bobbi," he retorted. "You know that your confession that night threw me. You can't expect me to return your feelings just because you actually happened to verbalize them to me. It's not something that can be switched on just like that. What I'm asking is that you give me the chance to fall in love with you."

"And while you're busy deciding if I'm someone you can fall in love with, I'm just supposed to put my feelings on hold? What sort of timeline are you looking at? Will a month or two be enough for you to figure out whether I could be worthy of your love? Six months? A year? And what if—after all that time—you didn't fall in love with me? Do you think it's fair that I risk even more heartbreak?"

"That's a lot of questions that I just don't have the answers to," he confessed. "I don't know how it'll work, I've never found myself in this position before. You're so damned important to me and I'm terrified of losing you."

“Then give me a chance to get over this thing we had and we can go back to being friends,” she said after a very long moment. “That way everybody’s a winner.”

“I don’t want that,” he snapped, losing patience. “I want more than that.”

“I’m not prepared to give you more. I won’t change who I am for you, Gabe. I just won’t, and if I’m really as important to you as you claim, you wouldn’t want me to.”

“I don’t want you to change . . .” He seemed to be speaking through clenched teeth. “I just want you to wear a damned dress on occasion, go to a bloody hairdresser, have your nails done. You’re a woman, for God’s sake. These things aren’t hardships.”

“They are to me!”

“You seem to be equating a visit to the salon with selling your soul to the devil.” He threw his hands up in despair, and she stared back at him with equal misery. He didn’t seem to understand that she was afraid that in the middle of all this makeover crap, he would fall in love with someone who simply didn’t exist, a Bobbi of his own invention. The prospect scared the hell out of her. If that happened she would be trapped playing a role for the rest of her life. She couldn’t do it, not even for Gabe.

“I think you should leave,” she said tiredly. “This isn’t achieving anything.”

“I’m not giving up,” he warned.

“Just stop the Campaign of Crazy with the flowers, please. You’re driving everybody nuts. I can’t be held responsible if my father or the guys at the shop hunt you down and force feed you roses.”

He chuckled in response to that quip.

“I really do miss you,” he said. “Not just in my bed . . . I miss you in my life. Please come back to me.”

“Please just go, Gabe,” she softly commanded, hardening her heart against the quiet plea.

He got up and wavered for so long that she feared he would come over and kiss her. He did take one hesitant step forward before abruptly turning on his heel and leaving.

Bobbi fought the impulse to run after him and surrender to his terms. It was the way she had always lived her life. She had gone from girl desperate to please and impress her father and big brothers to a woman futilely focused on trying to please just this one man, and she had to fight against the instinct to give him exactly what he asked for, even if it was detrimental to her own heart and sanity.

It took everything she had and then some, but she managed to fight against her instinct and emerge triumphant.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

When the delivery van showed up at the shop two days later, Sean and Pieter groaned and Craig rubbed his hands together at the prospect of more free flowers with which to butter up his wife. Apparently she had been very forgiving after that last time. Bobbi, in the meantime, was utterly dismayed that Gabe had so completely ignored her plea that he stop sending her flowers.

She stood waiting with her arms folded defensively over her chest. It was the same delivery guy as the last time but he didn't have a cavalcade of trucks following him or an army of guys to carry in the flowers this time. When he saw Bobbi's stance, he shrugged and grinned.

“If you'd just sign the delivery slip I'll get your stuff and be on my way.” Bobbi heaved an exasperated sigh and reached for the clipboard.

Bobbi watched him turn back to his truck and withdraw a cellophane wrapped basket from the back of the van. The thing was huge and looked heavy, but he managed to

carry it into the shop and drop it onto one of the closest work surfaces with a heavy thud.

“I was told to personally hand this over to you,” he said, stopping in front of Bobbi on his way out and holding out a familiar card to her. “You should tell your boyfriend to put these cards into envelopes, ma’am. More private that way.” Which meant that—she peered at the faded stitching on the breast pocket of his shirt—Quinton here had probably read the card. Along with whoever else had handled the order. She had a feeling that Gabe didn’t put them in envelopes because he knew that once she caught even the slightest glimpse of what he had written she wouldn’t stop reading. If it were in an envelope it would be too easy for her to toss it thoughtlessly aside.

She ignored Quinton, who shrugged and whistled as he returned to his truck. Pieter, Sean, and Craig had gathered around the cellophane-wrapped basket curiously.

“Do you think it’s a fruit basket? Or chocolates maybe?” Sean asked eagerly.

“I’m hoping for perfumes and lotions and stuff. Ellie would love that,” Craig inserted. Pieter cracked his bubblegum and glared at the basket like it had mortally offended him.

“You gonna open it, boss?” Sean asked when she just stood staring at the gigantic basket with dread. What if it was “perfumes and lotions and stuff.” How would she cope with something so obvious? She absently looked down at the card in her hand and read it slowly.

I fully confess to making the following up but since it’s what I want them to mean, I’m hoping you’ll grant me some leeway. So, did you know that pliers are symbolic for two people coming together? And (true story) wrench is something my heart does every time I see you? —G

She was baffled by that message and turned the card over, hoping for some clarity.

Drill bits are sharp

Handsaws are too

A grease streak or two

Are beautiful on you

She rapidly blinked away the tears that suddenly flooded her eyes and glanced up at the large basket at which the guys were still poking and prodding. Tucking the card safely into her pocket, she walked over to where they were trying to discern the contents through the layers of dark-blue cellophane.

She dragged off the ridiculous pink bow, tore off the crisp plastic, and gasped when she saw what he had given her.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Craig sounded both awed and disappointed.

“That’s so cool,” Sean whooped. Pieter snorted and turned away to amble back to the old hatchback VW he was servicing. The other two men also drifted off to their tasks and left Bobbi to stand and gape at the tool bouquet in front of her. Brand-spanking-new hand tools—probably worth thousands—arranged quite prettily in one of those round baskets usually reserved for floral arrangements. A complete set of screwdrivers were fanned out in the back, with pink—pink for heaven’s sake—rubberized handles facing up and sizes arranged from small to large. There were wrenches, levels, hammers, pliers . . . everything a girl could ever ask for from a set of tools. Everything accentuated in the prettiest pink. Gabe must have gone to great lengths to obtain them, and Bobbi found herself ridiculously touched by the gesture.

And then there was that silly little rhyme. It had hit all the right notes, and it scared Bobbi how quickly a part of her heart had melted. He could so easily sneak past her defenses when she wasn’t looking, especially if he kept doing things like this.

When Gabe drove up to Bobbi's shop later that day, the place was busier than usual. He could barely find space to park amongst all the cars in the lot waiting to be serviced. He had seen the masterful work she had done on Jason's Corvette—the car was unrecognizable from the heap he had seen on her shop floor a month ago and Jason was like a new dad with the damned thing. As Jason promised he told everybody who asked and, even those who didn't, where his car had been restored and had even put a sticker endorsing her shop in the rear window of the car. It looked like the advertising was paying off, judging by the amount of cars in the lot. Gabe was proud of Bobbi and ashamed for doubting her. He had known how much his skepticism had hurt her and that his misgivings had read as a complete lack of faith. It was probably another thing she had added to his list of flaws.

He walked into the bustling shop; Craig, Sean, and Pieter were busy with a different car each and Bobbi was in her office in earnest discussion with a debonair-looking older man. She didn't see him, and not wanting to interrupt the flow of her conversation, he wandered over to Craig, who was peering into the innards of an ancient-looking Jeep.

The man glanced up when Gabe came to stand beside the car.

“Hey,” Craig said tersely before tugging at something beneath the bonnet of the sick old beast. A spark plug maybe? Gabe was unashamedly clueless when it came to the inner workings of cars.

“Morning,” Gabe returned the greeting, and then stood in silence and watched him work.

“Thanks for the flowers,” Craig said after a conversational hiatus that had been filled with nothing but the sound of hammering and grinding machinery and rock and roll coming from the CD player stashed in a corner out of harm's way.

Gabe grinned at the man's temerity.

“You’re welcome. I’m glad you liked them.”

“My wife, Ellie, did. It got me off the sofa that night.”

“Why were you on the sofa?”

“She thinks I said her bum was big,” the man glowered and tugged at his ear. “Didn’t. I gave her a three and a half on a scale of ten. Ten apparently being gigantic.”

Gabe winced.

“You’re a brave man, Craig. I would have gone with a zero or less.”

“I figured three and a half was a good size, not too big and not invisible. No man likes an invisible bum.” Gabe wondered why they were standing here discussing the man’s wife’s behind, and he had a feeling that if the inimitable Ellie ever heard about it, Craig would be back on the sofa.

“Anyway, the flowers helped. I caught a glimpse of the card too,” he unapologetically admitted. “You should put those things in envelopes if you want privacy. I liked the forgiveness and admiration stuff. Used that on the missus. She was very impressed. Figured I owed you a thank-you.”

“Glad I could be of some help,” Gabe said with a complete lack of sarcasm. He had known that Bobbi would find some way to disperse of all those flowers; it naturally followed that she would have offered some to every person she knew. He had hoped that she would keep at least one bouquet of each for herself though, but a quick glance around the shop told him that he had hoped in vain.

“She’s not into the flowery stuff,” Craig said, accurately reading Gabe’s glance around.

“I know that,” Gabe admitted, irritated that Craig seemed to think he knew Bobbi better than Gabe did. “But the messages that came with the flowers were what I really hoped to get across.”

“Now the stuff you sent her this morning,” Craig muttered, leaning into gaping maw of the Jeep again and twisting at something. He grunted with effort as he continued to twist for what felt like hours, leaving Gabe hanging in suspense. Craig finally stood upright again and nodded down at the car in satisfaction.

“What about the stuff I sent this morning?” Gabe prompted impatiently and Craig looked at him with narrowed eyes.

“That was a stroke of genius.” He nodded in approval. “She loved it, even though she tried to pretend that she didn’t.” He gave Gabe a perusing glance before sighing and removing his filthy baseball cap. He rubbed a hand briskly back and forth over his short, messy hair before sticking the cap back onto his head.

“Can’t say I ever liked you,” he admitted, his voice gruff. “With your fancy suits, always waiting outside on the rare occasions that you picked our girl up from work. Figured you were scared of getting your posh shoes and pretty clothes dirty. I can’t trust a man who’s afraid of a bit of grease . . .” Gabe strove to remain unoffended by the less than sterling character assessment, hoping that there was a “but” in there somewhere. “But I reckon you’re not so bad.”

Gabe waited for the rest, but Craig seemed to be done talking. Well, faint praise was better than no praise he supposed as he watched Craig turn back to the car. It seemed that the man was done talking to him and, feeling comprehensively dismissed, Gabe walked over to the where the youngest guy, Sean, was working.

“He-ey,” the young man said with the exuberance of a puppy. “It’s the boss’s boyfriend. What’s up, bru?”

He unselfconsciously held out a grease-covered hand and Gabe took it with barely a flinch. He reminded himself that he had hand-sanitizer in the car and if he was going to be squeamish about this stuff he'd lose major points with Bobbi and just prove her point about them being unsuited.

"Listen." Sean was leaning in conspiratorially. "I was thinking: Miz R loves chocolates and dried fruit and stuff. You should totally consider sending her stuff like that." Gabe bit back a laugh at the transparency of young Sean's ploy. He was just hoping for the bounty to spill over onto him, as it no doubt had with the flowers.

"Did you give the flowers to your girlfriend as well?" Gabe asked, smiling, and Sean grinned before nudging Gabe with a friendly elbow.

"I have three girlfriends, and they all loved the flowers." Three. Gabe could barely cope with (or keep, for that matter) one. Ah, the vitality of youth. He stifled a laugh and glanced up to see that surly Pieter guy staring daggers at him. Wondering what that was all about, he excused himself and walked over to Pieter's workstation.

"Have I offended you in some way?" he asked directly.

"Yeah, the boss is a nice lady; she don't need some player playing her!" The words were delivered with a bit of heat and a lot of ice.

"I assure you, I'm not playing her," he told the skinny man, who had a three-inch height advantage on him.

"You can use your fancy words and all, but she's too good for you."

Gabe reflected on his previous sentence, wondering which of the seven words had been too "fancy" for Pieter.

"I agree," Gabe said. "She is too good for me, but I'm trying to become someone worthy of her."

Pieter's pale-blue eyes narrowed assessingly, and Gabe kept his stance open and his eyes level. Gabe watched the fight go out of the other man's bearing.

“You should stop sending her flowers. It’s not her thing,” Pieter said. Yet another guy who thought he knew Bobbi better than Gabe did. If Gabe weren’t so heartened by the fact that her employees obviously liked and respected her enough to fight for her, he would have been beyond annoyed. Besides, Bobbi had never received flowers from anybody precisely because they thought that she wasn’t someone who would appreciate them. But she was a woman underneath the overalls, he knew that better than anybody else, and despite everything, he suspected that deep down inside she had loved the flowers—maybe not the excess of them, but definitely the sentiment behind the gesture.

“It’s been mentioned before,” he said. He heard her voice and leaned to the side to see her past Pieter’s lanky bulk. She was leading the customer out of her office, her voice brimming with excitement. He wasn’t close enough to hear her words above the noise of the shop but whatever she was saying, she was damned enthusiastic about it.

She shook the man’s hand and waved him off as he climbed into his car and drove off. After the car had turned the corner that would take him out of sight of the shop, she pumped her fist in the air and did a happy shimmy.

He could tell exactly when she first caught sight of his car, because her body language tensed immediately. She turned slowly and even with the light behind her he could see her flinch.

“Gabe,” she said, her voice wobbling a bit.

“Can we talk?” he asked without preamble, and she nodded warily, indicating that he should follow her into her office. He dusted off the same chair he’d occupied the last time and saw that his handkerchief came away slightly less grimy this time. He noticed, as he sat down, that she had put the tool bouquet on a low filing cabinet next to her desk. She saw his attention drift to the basket and cleared her throat awkwardly.

“Thanks for the tools,” she said. “But I can’t keep them. They must have cost a fortune.”

He laughed. “I have a fortune.”

“Yes, but I don’t want you to spend it on me. That’s not your place.”

“I don’t want to get into this right now,” he dismissed. “I’m not taking the tools back; I wouldn’t know what to do with them. Use them or don’t. Give them away to your employees like you did the flowers, although I don’t imagine they’d be happy using pink tools.”

“There were way too many flowers,” she said, blushing guiltily. “I had to do something with them.”

“Well, the men certainly appreciated them. Did you know that kid has three girlfriends?” He shook his head in disbelief, and she grinned in spite of herself.

“He’s going to get caught at some point and it won’t be pretty.” She laughed, sounding so much like her old self that his heart constricted with longing. She caught herself and the laughter faded in her throat. “So what can I do for you?”

“My car needs a tune-up,” he lied, and her eyes flew to the Lamborghini. She had been itching to get her hands on—or rather inside—it for months now. He could see that she was torn. He had never used her shop in the year that it had been in business and even before that, when she had been tinkering with cars just for fun, he had never allowed her to lay a finger on any of his vehicles.

“And it’s making this weird knocking noise every time I change gears.” Another lie. The car handled like a dream, but he was willing to let her take it apart from top to bottom if it would make her happy and score him more brownie points with her.

“Is it like a hollow clunking sound?” she asked with a thoughtful frown.

“Yeah?”

“Hmm, it could be worn gear linkage, but that seems like an unlikely problem for a car under a year old,” she speculated. “And it’s not like you’ve ever tested her capabilities much on the road, so it can’t be from wear and tear.”

“So you’ll take a look?” he asked, trying not to sound too eager. Her eyes were watchful but she nodded.

“I’ll get Craig to have a look,” she told him.

“But I’d rather you did,” he said, because he knew how much she was itching to.

“I have other things to take care of,” she maintained, her eyes filled with longing as they tracked back to the car. But it was clear that she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of accepting this latest gift—because that’s what it was. He was giving her something that she had dying to have for months and . . . she was throwing it back in his face.

“What if I told you that I trusted only you to take care of my car?” he asked softly.

“I’d tell you that it’s too late . . . you should have placed your trust in me long before now.”

“Why are you being this way?” he asked in frustration. “What the hell did I do to you that was so damned awful? Okay so I wanted to keep our relationship a secret at first, I handled the situation badly, but punishing me for having human failings is petty as hell!”

“Do you really think I’m being petty? When you were ashamed to admit that you found me attractive and that I was your lover?”

“Let’s just be completely honest here, Bobbi! You’re punishing me because I’m not in love with you. I have the audacity to want you without craving all that romantic and sentimental bullshit as a side dish to the incredibly hot sex. I respect you and I care about you, but that’s not enough for you. I don’t love you the way you want me to so to hell with me, right?”

“You’re right. You’re absolutely right. I expected too much from you. But, what do you want from me, Gabe?” she asked gently. “Why have you been sending me flowers and poems and presents?”

“I wanted to . . . romance you, I guess,” he admitted.

“To what end?” she asked logically, and he watched her mutely. He wasn’t sure how to answer that question. “To get me back into bed? To get me to forgive you for hurting me? To apologize for what you said at the football match?”

“All of that.”

“And let’s say you succeeded in romancing me, what would the next step be? We go to the ball together, right? And then start a relationship that we both know would be doomed from the start.”

“Stop this,” he suddenly hissed. “Stop talking to me like I’m a preschooler. Yes, I wanted to romance you, I wanted to apologize, and I wanted to have a proper relationship with you. One that involves spending time together, enjoying each other’s company, and sex. Because I believe that we can be good together. And if it doesn’t last, it’s because that’s the way relationships go sometimes. Grow up, Bobbi. Sometimes all a couple has going for them is the sex, which can grow into mutual fondness, which can then become that damned Grand Passion that all women seem to aspire to. We’re lucky, we used to have a pretty good friendship to build a solid foundation on, in addition to better sex than most people have in a lifetime. Everything else will either fall into place or it won’t. But you want that happily ever after right now. And if you don’t get it, like a petulant child, you’re hell-bent on spoiling the chance we have to explore something that could actually be quite good between us.”

He had a valid point, Bobbi realized. So he wasn’t in love with her, but he did love her and that really was more than most couples had going for them. He looked hurt and disgusted with her and she could understand how he felt, but all the concerns that she had voiced that night in her room were still there. There was the fear that he would expect her to change too much in order to conform to his idea of the feminine ideal. The fear of more heartbreak—but she acknowledged that the chance of

heartbreak was a risk in every relationship—it was part of life. But while most other relationships had a chance of ending well, this one was almost doomed to failure, despite Gabe's grand talk about it possibly growing into something more. But balancing out the fear was the hope that even when it didn't work out, the relationship would die a natural and relatively painless death and leave them both still with a mutual respect and love for each other. Gabe wanted to try and despite all her misgivings—Bobbi now knew that she wanted to try as well.

“I have been punishing you,” she admitted, and his eyes jerked up to hers. “You mean the world to me, Gabe, and I hated that I didn't mean the same to you. I just . . .” She choked up and bit her lip as she tried to get herself under control again. “Let's go to the ball together and see where that takes us, but I'm not promising anything beyond that.” He nodded, his face remarkably grim for a man who had just received what he wanted.

“The other thing I can't promise you is some major change in appearance,” she warned. “If we're going to do this, you're going to have to accept me the way I am.”

“Bobbi, you're beautiful the way you are,” he assured her. “You always have been. I apologize if I ever made you feel less than that. But I hope you'll deign to wear a bra at the very least—there will be a lot of stodgy old men in attendance, and we wouldn't want any coronary incidents.”

That startled a laugh out of her and he looked pleased. Which sparked an epiphany in her: all these years of trying to make Gabe laugh or smile and she only now realized that he had put an equal amount of effort into surprising laughter and smiles out of her as well. And, she acknowledged to herself, he enjoyed doing so.

“So do you really want your car checked? Or was that just an excuse to come here?” She asked, and he smiled. One of those full-on, genuine smiles that she loved so much.

“Well, I wanted to see how you liked the tool bouquet and the car was my foot in the door. Besides, I know you've been itching to get your hands on it.”

“So you don't want her checked?” She couldn't quite hide her disappointment and Gabe's smile gentled.

“Of course I do. I hear you have quite the reputation for restoring and fixing vintage and exotic cars,” he teased, and she felt a surge of pleasure at his words.

“Did you see her?” she asked him.

“If you're referring to that former clunker of Jase's, then yes, I saw it. You did an amazing job. Congratulations.” She could see the unmistakable gleam of pride in his eyes and it warmed her from top to toes.

“That man who was in my office earlier?” She had to share the news with someone and she was suddenly excited to tell Gabe. “He has a 1969 Mustang convertible. She’s in decent condition but he wants me to service her, and even better? He belongs to an owner’s club! If I treat his baby well, he’ll recommend the shop to some of the other owners in the area. Isn’t that wonderful?”

“That is bloody brilliant, sweetheart.” He grinned, taking a step toward her and unexpectedly capturing her chin between his thumb and forefinger. He kissed her then, in full view of her employees and anybody else who might walk into the shop. It was a gentle kiss but filled with a longing and desire that matched hers—just his lips on hers and the tip of his tongue tracing along the parted seam of her mouth. He lifted his head with a soft sigh and dragged his eyes open.

“I needed that,” he said, and she smiled at him.

“I did too. Thank you.”

“You, Roberta Richmond, are so very welcome.” He spontaneously wrapped his arms around her and gathered her up in a tight hug. She returned the hug fiercely, so happy to have him back in her arms and in her life. They still had a list of problems a mile long, but she refused to worry about them right now. She just wanted to enjoy the perfection of this moment.

“Have dinner with me tonight?” he asked, and she lifted her head from his chest to meet his hopeful eyes.

“Okay.” He smiled, looking relieved, and dropped another sweet kiss on her lips.

“I’ll pick you up at five thirty,” he informed before reluctantly releasing her. He turned to leave and Bobbi studied his broad back dreamily for a moment before remembering something.

“Wait!”

His wide shoulders tensed, and he slowly turned back to face her. His expression was filled with anxiety, and she wondered if he expected her to change her mind. “You need a replacement car.”

“Oh, of course.” The naked relief on his face was telling and Bobbi felt a pang in her chest at his uncertainty. They were each going to feel unsure around the other for a while yet. She hoped it was something they could overcome soon.

“You can drive mine until yours is ready to be picked up. Sean can drop me off at home tonight.” She tugged the keys from her baggy overall pockets and tossed them at him. He caught them with a grimace of distaste. “Oh come on, she’s not that bad.”

“Bobbi, you’ve had that thing since you were eighteen,” he protested.

“And she still runs like a dream,” Bobbi lifted a challenging eyebrow and Gabe sighed. “I’ve kept her in perfect condition.”

“Fine.”

“Stop being such a snob.” She grinned. “She may not be as pretty as your Lamborghini but she’s got quirk and character.”

“I admit to finding quirk and character a lot more interesting than mere good looks these days,” he said with a warmth that left no doubt as to his sincerity.

Gabe’s heart melted when Bobbi’s entire face lit up like a beacon in response to his last comment. He hadn’t meant the words to be a metaphor for his changing attitude toward superficial good looks but that was certainly how she had taken it, and he found himself thinking of ways to keep that radiant smile on her face forever if he could.

After Gabe rang the doorbell at the Richmond house later that evening, he nervously smoothed down his hair, adjusted his tie, and did a breath check while waiting for someone to open the door. It wasn’t long before the door was yanked open by Billy. Gabe tried not to look too dismayed to see his friend; he hadn’t expected Billy to be visiting his family. He usually only visited Constantia on weekends. For him to be there on a Thursday night was unusual.

Billy stared at Gabe for an arrested moment before stepping aside to let him in. Gabe hadn't seen him since that football night nearly a month ago, and he soon discovered why. Billy slammed the door shut and turned to face Gabe with a furious expression on his handsome face.

"I don't exactly know what the hell went on between you and Bobbi that night, Gabe," he hissed without any preliminaries. "But you hurt her and it was only because Chase asked me to back off and give you both space that I haven't pushed the issue or kicked your arse before now! I'm warning you . . . hurt her again and, years of friendship aside, I will rearrange your face in the most painful way possible." Billy had always had such a colorful way with words.

"I know I hurt her . . . It was never my intention to do so. You know how much she means to me," Gabe murmured. "But I'm trying to figure this out, we both are, and I'd like to ask you to give us the opportunity to do so without any interference from you."

"Figure what out? What exactly is going on between you?" Billy asked, and Gabe inhaled unsteadily, acknowledging that this was it—the point of no return.

"Bobbi and I are . . . um." He coughed. "We're dating." Billy's jaw dropped and he shook his head as if to clear it before gaping at Gabe in disbelief.

"You're what?"

"Dating."

"What the . . . Gabe, she's like a sister to you, man!" Billy looked horrified, repulsed, and frankly disbelieving.

"No, she's not," Gabe responded succinctly. "She's not like a sister to me. At all. I don't feel anything remotely brotherly toward her, and you'd better resign yourself to that fact before she comes down those stairs. I won't have you making her feel uncomfortable about our relationship."

“But I am uncomfortable with it,” Billy admitted. “It’s weird as hell. Where did this come from?”

“Damned if I know,” Gabe confessed. “But that’s how it is, so get over it and don’t even think about showing that appalled face to Bobbi.”

“Does my dad know about this?”

“Not yet.”

“How do you think he’ll feel about it?” Billy asked pointedly, and Gabe fixed a grim look on him.

“I don’t really give a damn how he feels about it or how you feel about it. This is between Bobbi and me.”

“I don’t like it,” Billy growled.

“I don’t care,” Gabe responded. “But Bobbi does . . . so try not to put unfair pressure on her, will you?”

“I’ll keep my own counsel, for Bobbi’s sake,” Billy said after a pause. “But what I said before? About rearranging your face? Forget that. You break my sister’s heart and I’ll destroy you, Gabe.”

Gabe nodded curtly.

“Noted.”

Bobbi had heard the doorbell five minutes ago but she couldn’t bring herself to go downstairs. She checked her appearance for the umpteenth time and morosely concluded that it was still the same. She was wearing her navy-blue, all-purpose dress combined with her favorite tribal jewelry and a pair of flat sandals, which were the only pair of shoes she owned that looked even remotely feminine.

“This is a mistake,” she whispered, feeling sick. “Oh God, what are you doing, Roberta?”

There was a soft knock on her door, and her stomach sank into her ugly sandals.

“Come in,” she called faintly. When the door opened to reveal Billy instead of Gabe, she slumped in relief.

“Gabe’s here for you,” her brother said, his voice strangely gentle.

“I know,” she said.

“Are you coming down?”

“Soon,” she whispered. He turned as if to leave but changed his mind and came to stand beside her, staring at her reflection in the full-length mirror.

“This must seem odd to you,” she said, and he smiled.

“A bit.”

“I’m in love with him, you know,” she confessed. “I have been for a long time. He doesn’t feel the same way about me and that’s okay.”

“Is it okay?” Billy asked softly and her lips trembled.

“He loves me and he . . .” She blushed, this was her brother after all. “He uh . . . likes me in that way, but he’s not in love with me. For now, that’s enough.”

“When will it stop being enough?” Her brother, usually such an obnoxious joker, was being remarkably sweet and understanding and his concern brought a sting to her eyes and warmed her heart.

“Who knows? Maybe it will always be enough.”

“Are you content with merely enough?”

“For now,” she repeated with a decisive nod.

“Just be happy, Runt.” Her brother smiled and gently leaned his shoulder against her until she lost her balance and nudged back with a laugh. “Now are you coming downstairs or not? Your date seems rather nervous.”

“He does?” That thought was so far beyond the realms of possibility that it boggled her mind for a moment.

“Yep. I left him in the den with Dad. Last I saw, he was trying to explain that he was here to take you out.”

“Oh my God, what did Dad say?”

“I don’t think he got it. He asked Gabe where he was taking you; I left Gabe to sweat it out and came up here to get you.”

“A date?” Gabe was getting the full, formidable Mike Richmond death stare and he finally knew what all the man’s business competitors had felt like just before their

downfall. The man was certainly a force to be reckoned with, but Gabe had never had that force turned on him before.

“That’s why you sent her all those flowers? You were courting her?” An old-fashioned word that made Gabe wince guiltily when he thought about what those flowers had really been about. Courting? That would have been like shutting the gate after the horse had already bolted.

“Not exactly,” Gabe admitted, keeping his hands folded respectfully in front of him and his eyes level. Don’t show any sign of weakness, he reminded himself. Mike Richmond pounced on weakness.

“So what was that if not a courtship?”

“An apology,” Gabe confessed. “We’d had an argument about something.”

“Like a lover’s spat?” he asked genially, and Gabe swallowed, sensing a trap.

“Just an argument,” he maintained.

“How long has this thing been going on between you and Bobbi?” The older man came right out and asked the question Gabe had been dreading.

“Nearly a month.”

“And this is the first time you see fit to come to my door like a gentleman and take her out? What have you been doing before now?” The man’s voice had turned to ice, and Gabe cleared his throat uncomfortably.

“What happened before now is in the past, Mike. I see no reason to revisit it.”

“You treat my little girl with respect, Gabriel.” Mike looked absolutely furious with him and Gabe knew that the man’s anger was completely justifiable. “You’ve both been carrying on doing God knows what for weeks now and she’s clearly been miserable! So you show her the respect she deserves from now on.”

“Yes, sir.” Gabe nodded. “You have my word on that.”

They heard the murmur of Bobbi’s and Billy’s voices outside the door, and after giving him one last warning look, Mike turned to face the door as it swung inward to reveal his two youngest children.

Gabe looked up too and was helpless to prevent the smile that curled his lips when he caught sight of Bobbi. He kept his eyes on her pretty face, not wanting to acknowledge that familiar, ugly dress of hers until he absolutely had to. She looked nervous and when she met his eyes; he winked at her to put her at ease. He made his way to her side and put his arm around her waist, laying an unmistakable claim before he looked up to meet first her father’s and then her brother’s eyes, arranging his

expression to show them nothing but absolute possessiveness. His message was unmistakable: Mine.

